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ABSTRACT

Modern society as it has evolved is fragmented, but its ever increasing complexity has developed so many interfaces that reintegration has become mandatory. Cable television (CATV) can serve as an integrating force which can help members of the community to pool their resources in a variety of problem-solving efforts. This can only happen, however, when CATV demonstrates that it has a practical pay-off by showing that it can assist individuals to overcome their feelings of helplessness in the face of huge problems. For this to occur, cable systems will have to be designed in accordance with the defined needs of communities. Systems such as the one designed for the Community Communications Project in New Paltz, New York can serve as working models for others in the field. (PB)

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HUMPTY - DUMPTY AND THE CABLE

Leo C. Irrera

January 18, 1974

Preface

"There was a time when communities insisted on being served by their institutions — and, in fact, set them up for this purpose. Somehow, the situation flipped and communities have become the servants, bombarded with requests to support and maintain these same institutions which have developed a life of their own as they forgot their original purpose. The electronic age and the subsequent information speed-up has made this situation intolerable. New Paltz, through the use of contemporary media and revitalized forms of community communications, may be turning the situation around again. The topic will deal in part with the Community Communications Project of New Paltz."

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Publi-cable Meeting January 18, 1974 - Leo C. Irrera

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Humpty - Dumpty and The Cable

Not being grounded in technology but in art my major interest in the cable is in its effects rather than in the medium itself. Most happenings today, can be considered to be media matters and I believe that society is being bounced around from medium to medium, half dazed, looking for someone to blame, some "Sinister force", for the disappearance of the good old "Daze". Often they do blame the media but, to paraphrase an old friend, usually for the content, the tip of the iceberg, the visible part that does the least damage.

As an artist, I'm hooked on wholeness. I hate to see poor Humpty Dumpty lying there, all fragmented. His education is split off from his mental health which is split off from his physical health which is separated from his safety, his finance, his science, his technology, his industry, labor, ecology and even energy. Mc"Luhan says that in the "Electric Age" Humpty Dumpty goes back together again with a rush. The resulting pain can probably be attributed to the wrong pieces rubbing against each other in the process.

Cable television can serve as an integrating force in helping us put the poor creature together again with a minimum of pain and a maximum of pleasure.

One might ask, "Why bother to defragment society? Wasn't it fragmented for a purpose?" Of course, it was. It's easier to deal with any situation one piece at a time. — It's more orderly. - Responsibilities and accountability can be more easily set. Fragementation has - at least on the surface - worked pretty well for us in the past. It probably would have continued to do so, but remember "In the electric age Humpty Dumpty goes back together again with a rush".

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This creates all kinds of interfaces and the interface is where the action is. Consequently, we have the executive rubbing against the legislative which is rubbing against the judicial; we have transportation rubbing against ecology and both rubbing against energy. We have a turnabout, where power is moving from the hands of the classifiers and withholders of information into the hands of the disseminators. We have local governments which due to their basic structure are limited for the most part to less than 50% efficiency in approaching any problem, and we have only problems that require total efficiency for solution. - For example, there is no way for the ecological or energy problems to be solved only by republicans or only by the transportation department or only by the oil magnates or only by New York, or only by the U.S. A. "Humpty Dumpty must come together again". Perhaps this time all the kings soldiers and all the kings men can do the job if we throw in all the kings children, agencies, institutions and things.

Only through the pooling of perceptions - which means utilizing the thinking of all those non-experts, who were not yet taught that it can't be done - and by pooling our technologies and placing them at the disposal of every individual in accord with his needs, will it be possible for us to come up with the comprehensive approach required for rebuilding our beautiful egg.

There is a law of reversibility stating that if you push anything too far it flips. Technology has created our existing situation, if pushed far enough it can cure it. I believe the cable can be the essential medium, the plumbing system for technology to get us there.

So "What's the story?" Why hasn't it happened yet? Why has Kevin White decided that* Boston would make no effort to be cabled for a while? Why aren't more communities clammering for it? Why have even those schools and communities with cable channel access, not taken full advantage of the opportunity? Why

*Incidentally cable may be the first medium that won't be helped by having been banned in Boston.

has government, local or otherwise, not provided mass subsidies for this purpose?

There are of course, many reasons, economical, political and perhaps even moral. There is one reason, however, that overides all others and that is that neither communities nor government perceive a strong enough "Pay-off". (I'm not talking about the kind we've been hearing so much about lately). The country is in a technological doldrum, where progress has turned to garbage and pollution, affluence has created poverty, abundance has created scarcity and the promise of all those new toys from the Cadillacs to the tape recorders to television has generated into fear and confusion. The resulting information explosion letting everyone in on everyone else's business in every corner of the world, has instilled us with a sense of futility and isolation, where one member of a family looks at another during a commercial and asks, "Isn't there anything we can do about it?"

- And into this media environment we are prepared to inject another toy. - A good toy, perhaps the one that can pull us out but we are facing a public not too unlike the proverbial soda inventor who after years of experimenting with 1-Up, 2-Up, etc. decided to throw in the towel at 6-Up and he never knew how close he came.

As a community member I think I would be intensely interested in the cable if it could help me do something about all those things I presently feel helpless about. As an educator how could I resist the cable if it could truely support my work? As a government official if the cable could help me get to some of those knotty problems with the positive collaboration of my constituents, could I refuse it? As a parent, I don't really mind shopping and having the man come to the house to read the meter, but if the

cable could turn my community into an educational resource in the real sense and make it more enjoyable for my children I might buy it.

One thing that is certain is that this country has always been willing and able to support financially and otherwise those things it really wanted (i.e. National Defense Highway System), and those things it placed in high priority, such as WW II. Buckminster Fuller's research clearly indicates that according to the existing capital resources of the time, none of the nations involved in World War Two could afford to fight it. The war nevertheless was fought with many participants coming out of it wealthier, at least until recently, than they had ever been before - regardless of whether they won or lost.

We are all in someway involved in the cable or we wouldn't be in this room. Undoubtedly our involvement is sustained by some sort of personal "Pay-off", whether it be the advance or a new technology that we have a stake in, or the fulfilling of some leadership or creative kick, or a commitment to helping society in some way or possibly just for enjoyment. In our involvement we may be apt to overlook the real priorities of those communities or institutions out there, and their assistance is mandatory if a medium such as the cable is to grow.

What I'm suggesting by all this, I suppose, is that the days of touting the potential of new toys, then laying them on communities, expecting them to play with them, pay for them and develop them for the gratification of the inventors, promoters and researchers may be over; That from now technology must be designed in accord with defined needs. When this is accomplished there will be no question as to economic viability. Technology for the most part is nothing more than a "How". Unless it can be carefully matched to a "What" it's the kind of extravagance we can no longer afford.

I would, therefore, propose that rather than devoting more time to finding, attributing and promoting new magnificences in regard to the cable we divert

our energies to helping communities match whatever it is they already have to whatever it is they have to do. This, of course, includes the utilization of that existing cable channel.

By no means am I belittling the valuable work done by those in the forefront of C.A.T.V. - many of whom are in this room-. The efforts of men such as Mr. Smith and Mr. Wigren have served to alert us to a new medium and to its potential. This has been a valuable first step. The second step might perhaps be to work with those communities who either have cable or have it soon coming, to help them define those problems that have defied solutions under the old system and the old perceptual base, and that we assist them in developing new perceptions and problem solving mechanisms. These mechanisms will not only include the cable but will most likely require it.

This has been our approach in the Community Communications Project of New Paltz. It's frustratingly slow, but gradually developing the broad base support necessary for community communications. You might say that in this phase one hand is picking up and assorting pieces of eggshell, carefully trying them next to each other so they don't shatter and are not too abrasive, while the other hand is preparing the glue that may hold them together, by developing cable channel 12.

While a good deal remains to be done, the one thing that has been accomplished is a general agreement among the project participants that the egg should be put together again and that this tool might help.

Some details:

In less than a year the Community Communications Project of New Paltz has produced more than two hundred hours of Cable Vision. From July to November they averaged five hours a day from five to six days per week.

As a result of the work done in New Paltz other communities and a number of educators have taken heart and have expressed a desire to get started with

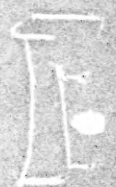
their own projects. Thereare problems however, and these should not be slighted and can be discussed at the end of the tape. I have also prepared a list of learnings resulting from our work that can also be discussed at that time.

Let me conclude this portion by saying that if the assumption stated earlier in regard to the need for "Community and Governmental Pay-offs" is accurate then the first order of business would be to find the right reinforcement. As a result of my exnerience with New Paltz and other communities around N.Y. State I would propose that the strongest payoff would be to show that cable can happen in communities by developing and supporting working models such as New Paltz. The work that is being done in areas such as Reston and Irving Texas is, of course, important. However, the fact that the great majority of existing cabled communities fall into the New Paltz category with fewer than two thousand subscribers and grandfathered operations must be considered in setting priorities. Without the support and collaboration of these communities the cable will have to wait a long time to mature. These communities will not support promises. They want to see working models that are within their means. Our obligation is to give them these models.

Addendum:

SOME LEARNINGS:

1. Tools for Community Communications must be developed neutrally. That is:
   - They should not represent any singular interest whether it be education, business or "Do-Goodism".
   - There must be a communal sense of ownership.
   - There should be broadbased or neutral support financial or otherwise.
2. Communities, at least in the early phases can not and will not assume sole support.
   - They require the encouragement of knowing that it is happening somewhere - (low risk).
   - They fear getting in over their heads.
   - They don't percieve of cable as a priority.
3. Communities will use the channel and filling channel space is no problem: If:
   - The project is designed around the real needs of community members.
   - They feel the project is "Respectable" or truely representative.
   - If it doesn't seem too complicated.
4. Communities require much on the spot assistance in utilizing the whole array of electronic media.
   - Some kind of training is required.
   - Training must be kept informal and presented as needed.
   - Communities don't like to be bombarded by "Experts".
5. There is a strong need for communities to develop new perceptions in regard to technology and in fact toward themselves.
   - Communities will accept help in developing new problem solving mechanisms, if help is on their terms.
   - The need to look at things differently is beginning to emerge.
   - There does not seem to be much disagreement that the old mechanisms leave something to be desired.



6. We are presently not set up either on a national or local scale to provide this kind of assistance.

- We are impeded by separation of functions.
- We are impeded by the accountability fad.
- We are impeded by our categories.
- We are impeded by our own outmoded perceptual base.